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AUTHOR Piorkowski, Joan L.
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ABSTRACT

The Equal Opportunity Program of the School of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin at Madison has, in the past, had the problem of low graduation rates. Attempts by the staff to develop better methods for retaining students have resulted in a program that offers one-to-one tutorial help in basic communication skills. Skills training that is related to the courses in which students are enrolled has been found to be an effective way of changing the negative attitudes that both students and faculty have toward tutoring programs. Results have been promising; attendance at tutoring sessions and student grade-point averages have both improved significantly. (KS)

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Joan L. Piorkowski
Department of English
College of St. Thomas
St. Paul, MN 55105

Overcoming Student and Faculty Resistance to Remediation: Course-Related Tutoring in Communication Skills

The Equal Opportunity Program of the School of Nursing of the University of Wisconsin--Madison is a federal program which was established in 1969 to encourage Black, Spanish-American, and Native American students to prepare for a career in Nursing. Its principle goal is to recruit, retain, and graduate these students. The program, five years in length, offers counseling services, tutoring in communication skills and sciences, and financial aid. An adjustment of regular admission and progression policies is made for E.O.P. students, but they must meet the same requirements and reach the same achievement levels expected of all baccalaureate students by their final year. At present the program serves fifty women.

Since its beginning in 1969, the program has done very well in recruiting students, but its retention and graduation rates have been appalling: only seven out of 109 students have graduated since 1969. What makes these figures even worse is that most of the students who transfer or drop out do so in their Junior and Senior years when they are taking their upper level nursing courses.

When a new director and a new staff were hired in 1975,

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their obvious priority was to develop better methods for retention and graduation, and more effective tutorial services was one method that was emphasized. As Project Specialist in Communication Skills, my responsibility was to set up an efficient tutoring system in a variety of communication skills. My preliminary work with a few students had convinced me that one factor in why the program was losing its upperclassmen was because the students had not mastered fundamental reading, writing, and study skills by the end of their Sophomore years. Such deficiencies made it impossible for them to succeed in upper level courses which required that they apply textbook concepts to practical situations, and organize and assimilate increasingly complex materials. Though they had been able to pass introductory courses and general electives, in many cases with marginal grades, in the end they were overwhelmed by their poor preparation in basic skills.

I found, however, that my biggest problem in establishing an effective tutorial component was not in diagnosing communications skills problems or in finding solutions for them. The major problem was the negative attitude that both students and faculty had toward tutoring: the students were unwilling to come in for help, and the Nursing School faculty was unwilling to refer them.

There were several reasons for the students' poor attitudes. In the first place, they believed that tutoring was demeaning, that it labeled them in the eyes of their

peers and the faculty as deficient. Secondly, they had an overwhelming lack of confidence in their own abilities. They were well aware that they lacked certain skills essential for success in college and this awareness caused them to be fatalistic about their efforts. They felt that their grades depended on chance no matter what kind of help they got, so they saw no need for attending tutoring sessions. Even though they had been admitted to the university under relaxed admissions standards and with an assurance of help to acquire the skills they need to graduate, they still felt that their lack of skills was their fault and something to be ashamed of. Finally, the students were unwilling to come in for help that was not related directly to their course work. They were enrolled for twelve credit hours of regular courses, and they felt that they needed to use their time learning the course content rather than such "extras" as writing, reading, or study skills.

The attitude of the faculty matched that of the students for several reasons. Many felt that students who did not perform well on tests or who needed tutoring were either lazy or "dumb", and thus did not belong in the School of Nursing. A few were also suspicious of my qualifications and were convinced that tutors like myself did the work for the students. As a result, instructors were reluctant to provide any tutoring aids such as sample test questions or model papers. They believed that such aids made things "too easy" for the students.

Clearly I had to work to change these attitudes if I were going to teach anyone anything successfully. Both students and faculty needed to get to know me and to understand the nature of my job. That is, they needed to be reminded that a tutor teaches skills that students need to master if they are to become independent learners. The goal of tutoring is to make students independent, not dependent. However, all three parties--faculty member, student, and tutor--must work together to realize this goal.

It seemed to me that the obvious place to begin was to offer tutorial help in communication skills that was directly related to the courses in which students were already enrolled. I hoped by doing so to "bribe" the students to come in and get to know me, as well as to come in and learn. I also wanted to involve the nursing faculty in the success of the communication skills tutoring. I sought out the instructor of the first nursing course, N 101, and explained my goals to her. Together we developed study aids for the three required papers in the course. The instructor spent extra time with me explaining the course objectives and paper requirements. I advised the students by letter that the extra help was available and half the E.O.P. students enrolled in N 101 made use of it. The study aids were a success: the fifty per cent who used them before doing the required papers got better grades ("C" to "A") than those who did not ("D" and "F").

Word of their success spread rapidly among both students and faculty, generating interest in the communication skills

tutoring. The instructor and I expanded our study aids for N 101 to include sample test questions for the midterm and final. I also tutored the students in textbook reading, using the required readings for the course, and I taught note-taking techniques by reviewing their N 101 notes for organization and completeness. All tutoring was done on a one-to-one basis. Interest in the N 101 materials remained high until the end of the semester.

My success with the first attempt at course-related tutoring in communication skills has led me to try it with other courses, particularly nursing courses, and this strategy has been successful. Course-related tutoring has helped improve the attitudes of both students and faculty. Attendance at tutoring sessions has increased. During Fall semester 1976, thirty-one out of forty-nine students came in for help. Whereas I was seeing three or four students a week when I started the program, I now see eight to ten for appointments ranging from fifteen minutes to a half hour.

Students' confidence in their own ability has also increased, and their fatalistic expectation of failure is beginning to disappear as they learn to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in reading, writing, and study skills. They are seeing that they can master the skills in the three areas one by one. As they mark improvement in their work and are successful in it, they ask to use more advanced resources in communication skills. Several students have worked in programmed texts with minimal supervision.

The faculty's attitude has changed in that instructors are now more aware of the communication skills difficulties of all students. In addition to sharing the goals of their courses with me, they also refer students and ask for information about the other tutoring resources available on campus. The attitude that only "dumb" students do poorly in courses is changing, and faculty are becoming more aware that any student can have basic skills deficiencies which can interfere with his or her progress in a course.

One tangible result of the faculty's new interest in tutoring has been the institution of a Test File of nursing courses. The test file is a diagnostic and instructional tool for the learning of test-taking skills. Nursing school instructors have contributed sample test questions for each course, usually from tests that are no longer being given. A student who gets a poor grade on an exam reviews the exam with his or her instructor. If the instructor decides that the poor exam performance resulted from some difficulty in test-taking rather than from a weak knowledge of course content, the student is referred to me. There are some basic and consistent errors that a student can make in taking objective tests, and by observing a student's approach to the sample questions, I can usually pinpoint the pattern of a student's errors and make suggestions to him or her on how to correct it. The student is then urged to use the file to practice the kinds of questions he or she finds troublesome. The file is available to non-E.O.P. students as well as to

E.O.P. students, and in Fall 1976, it was equally used by both groups.

To summarize, the Equal Opportunity Program of the School of Nursing of the University of Wisconsin--Madison has in the past had the problem of losing its students in their Junior and Senior years. In the past two years, the staff has tried to develop better methods for retaining and graduating the students and has found that offering one-to-one tutorial help in communication skills that is related to the courses in which the students are enrolled is an effective way of changing the negative attitudes that both students and faculty have towards tutoring programs. In this way students are also encouraged to acquire the skills they must have to succeed in college.

Our results so far have been most promising; attendance at tutoring and student grade point averages have both improved significantly.